Seth Kantor Is Dead; Reporter, 67, Fought To Protect Sources

By THOMAS J. LUECK

Seth Kantor, a Washington correspondent whose steadfast refusal to disclose his sources led to court tests that defined the concept of "qualified privilege" for journalists under the First Amendment, died on Tuesday while undergoing tests in a Washington hospital. He was 67.

The cause was cardiac arrest, the hospital said.

Mr. Kantor's newspaper career began in 1948 in Colorado. He became a Washington correspondent for the Scripps-Howard chain of newspapers in 1962. The next year, in an article in The Fort Worth Press, Mr. Kantor quoted unnamed Government sources as predicting the Pentagon would award a contract for a fighter plane to the General Dynamics Corporation.

He was called before a Senate subcommittee and asked his sources for the article. He declined to disclose them.

In 1974, after he had left Scripps-Howard to become a Washington correspondent for The Detroit News, his use of unnamed sources to identify two men as organized crime figures had him back in court. After being sued for libel by the two men, and refusing to divulge his sources, the case was decided in his favor by a panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

In finding that Mr. Kantor had exercised "qualified privilege" under the First Amendment, the three-judge panel held that journalists did not have a blanket right to refuse to disclose sources. But it said that reporters should be ordered to disclose confidential sources only in "rare circumstances" in civil lawsuits.

Mr. Kantor, who was one of the journalists accompanying President John F. Kennedy when he was assassinated in Dallas, spent more than a decade investigating the background of Jack Ruby, the killer of Lee Harvey Oswald. In 1978, he published "Who Was Jack Ruby?" a book that accused the Warren Commission of ignoring evidence that Mr. Ruby may have been connected to a conspiracy in the Kennedy assassination.

He is survived by his wife of 41 years, Anne; two daughters, Amy Van Genabeek and Susan Bank, and four grandsons.

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